

Relativisation in the History of Dutch: Major Shift or Lexical Change?

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B.M.H. Strang, *A History of English*, London: Methuen 1970, 141-142: “(...) relatives need to be understood in the light of their own history over an extended period, and are not well illuminated by piecemeal presentation. Yet at any one time they have been part of a working language, and their role must be describable, if only in terms of shifts in the balance of probabilities”.

1 Introduction

In one of the landmarks of linguistics, the seventeenth-century general and rational *Port Royal Grammar* (1660), the authors discuss the complex proposition *invisible God created the visible world*, arguing that “three judgments pass through my mind which are included in this proposition” (Rieux & Rollin, eds, 1975: 99). These judgments are 1. God is invisible, 2. God created the world, and 3. the world is visible, of which number 2 is the main proposition and numbers 1 and 3 are subordinate propositions. The authors continue: “these subordinate propositions are often in our mind, **without being expressed in words** (...). But sometimes they are also expressly designated, and **it is to this end that the relative pronoun contributes** (...): God **WHO** is invisible created the world **WHICH** is visible” (ibid: 100; emphasis added).

According to the Port Royal Grammar, the relative pronoun is a useful logical device. Whether we agree with the authors of the grammar or not, relativisation is an interesting linguistic topic that has been addressed by various linguists from different points of view, but not yet, as far as I know, from a fully comparative Germanic point of view, both synchronically and diachronically. The conference *Dialect Contact and History on the North Sea Littoral* has brought linguists in the field of the various Germanic languages together in order to explore the differences and similarities of both modern and earlier stages of these cognate languages. In my contribution, I will discuss some major questions concerning developments of the relative system in the history of Dutch.

2 Relativisation strategies and the data of Modern Dutch

Romaine (1984: 438-9) distinguishes three types of relative-clause formation strategies:

- languages which use an invariant relativizing particle: for example, Norwegian and Danish with the relative particle *som*
- languages which use relative pronouns: German and Dutch¹
- languages which use a mixed system: English with invariant *that* and the relative pronouns *who*, *which* (originally interrogatives).²

¹ In Romaine’s terminology, German and Dutch are languages which use ‘true relative pronouns’, i.e. case-coding pronouns.

² According to Romaine, another representative of the mixed type is Swedish, with both the particle *som* and the originally interrogatives *vilken*, *vars*, etc.

The diversified picture that emerges for the modern Germanic languages may raise questions about the past. Furthermore, in order to complete the picture, we have to pay attention to a dead Germanic language, too: Gothic, the oldest Germanic language that has come down to us, which has a remarkably simple relativisation system. In Gothic, the relative pronoun was formed by the suffix *ei* added to the demonstrative pronoun, i.e. *saei*, *sôei*, *patei*. The same suffix may be added to other pronouns as well, as in *ikei* ‘I who’, and to adverbs like *þar* ‘there’ resulting in *þarei* ‘where’. As may be clear, the Gothic strategy differs from the three strategies above, by the addition of a relative suffix — which is not an independent relative particle — to pronouns and adverbs.³

The differences in relativisation strategy between the various Germanic languages, none of which originally had separate relative pronouns or particles, provides evidence for the assumption that relative clauses developed in the individual Germanic dialects rather than that they were inherited from Proto-Indo-European or Proto-Germanic. Having said this, we can nevertheless establish that the Indo-European languages with a relative pronoun strategy have something in common: the IE relative pronouns were either ‘created’ from demonstratives (for instance, German *der*, *die*, *das*)⁴ or from interrogatives (for instance, French *qui*, *que* and Latin *quis*, *quae*, *quod*).⁵

In Modern Dutch, which has a relative pronoun strategy, demonstrative pronouns (so-called D-forms) and interrogative pronouns (so-called W-forms) are both used as relative pronouns. The following examples illustrate this:⁶

D-forms (originally demonstratives): **die** and **dat**

DIE common gender singular relative and plural relative

- (1) de man die... (the man R)
- (2) de vrouw die... (the woman R)
- (3) de boeken die ... (the books R)

DAT neuter singular relative

- (4) het boek dat... (the book R)

W-forms (originally interrogatives): **wie** and **wat**

WIE for human referents, either singular or plural

- (5) het kind met wie zij speelde... (the child with R she played)
- (6) de kinderen met wie zij speelde (the children with R she played)
- (7) wie wil eten, moet werken (R wants to eat, has to work) **free relative** or headless relative

Contrary to Romaine and others, I am including both relativizers with antecedents (or heads) and headless or free relatives here, such as in (7) and (10).

³ The difference depends on the suffix status of *ei*, which is beyond discussion in the Gothic handbooks and publications such as Lehmann (1994: 36), although the single element *ei* is also used as a clause connective with the meaning ‘that, so that’.

⁴ Apart from these relative pronouns, German has ‘interrogative’ pronouns such as *was*, *welch*, too.

⁵ Linguists have explained this phenomenon by stressing that, on the one hand, demonstratives have a definite meaning, a semantic characteristic shared with the most frequent usage of the relatives, whereas, on the other hand, interrogatives easily function as subordinators, a syntactic characteristic typical of relatives. Cf. De Schutter & Kloots (2000: 325–6).

⁶ R indicates the relative pronoun, relative adverb or relative pronominal adverbial. The examples are glossed in English, with the exception of the relative markers themselves in order to avoid confusion with the rules for the English relative markers *who*, *which*, *that* etc.

WAT singular non-human referents and neuter singular

- (8) alles wat je wilt... (everything R you want...)
- (9) een/het boek wat... (a/the book R)
- (10) wat je doet, is je eigen zaak (R you do, it is your own business) **free relative**
- (11) * de hond met wat hij speelde (* the dog with R he played)

Example (11) is ungrammatical in Modern Dutch. Instead of *met wat*, ‘with R’, a **relative pronominal adverb(ial)** *waarmee* is used, which consists of the relative adverb *waar* + the postposition *mee*, *in* etc.

WAAR + postposition (WAARMEE, WAARIN etc.): relative pronominal adverb(ial)s

- (12) de hond waarmee hij speelde (the dog R he played)
- (13) het boek waarin hij las (the book R he read)

The relative adverb *waar* also occurs as a single element either with or without a head. Cf. (14) and (15):

WAAR: relative adverb

- (14) de plaats waar zij woonde (the place R she lived)
- (15) waar je woont, is belangrijk (R you live is important)

From the examples given it appears that it is not only in the case of the free relatives that I take a broad view on the relative data: instead of restricting myself to the relative pronouns, I am also taking both the relative adverbs and the relative pronominal adverbs into consideration.⁷ As I will proceed to demonstrate, these relative adverbial data fit nicely into the development of the Dutch relative pronoun system.

Examples (1) to (15) may give an impression of complexity, an impression upheld in grammars and handbooks according to which the syntactical rules governing the choice between the D-forms and the W-forms are rather complex, and, moreover, subject to considerable regional and stylistic variation (cf. De Schutter 1994: 460). The question arises on the basis of what principles speakers (or writers) select either a D- or a W-form. Examples (4) and (9) seem to indicate that there is some overlap between the two subsystems: both *het boek dat* and *het boek wat* occur. To make things more complicated, examples of a few other relative pronouns such as **WELK(E)**, **HETWELK** (originally interrogatives) and **HETGEEN** (originally demonstrative) could have been added, all alternative relative pronouns, restricted to (highly) formal written language.

What we see in Modern Dutch is the reflex of its past. The relative system of Modern Dutch reflects an age-long competition between the two subsystems of D- and W-relatives. The D-relatives, originating from demonstratives, are supposed to reflect the original system that was apparently challenged by interrogative-based relative W-forms. After a first stage with only D-relatives, competing W-relatives must have gained ground and this led to the present situation of Modern Dutch (cf. van der Wal & van Bree 1994: 265). The question that presents itself is how this change came about, what route the introduction of W-relatives took and what factors played a role in the process. In order to answer these questions, we have to examine the various stages of a thousand years of Dutch language data, from Old and Middle Dutch via Early Modern Dutch to present-day Modern Dutch.

⁷ Apart from complement clauses, introduced by the complementizer *dat*, many linguists distinguish between adverbial clauses, introduced by subordinating conjunctions expressing time, location, manner etc., and relative clauses, introduced by demonstrative or interrogative pronouns (cf. Burridge 1993: 77). When dealing with relative clauses, they often do not take the adverbial clauses into consideration.

3 Three similar developments in the history of Dutch: from D-forms to W-forms

Apart from the rise of alternative relative pronouns, three major developments in the history of Dutch may be distinguished:

DIE	→	WIE
DAT	→	WAT
DAAR	→	WAAR

In the chronological table below the data from various periods are shown:

Table 1. Chronological table of Dutch relatives.

1000–1170 Old Dutch	D-pronouns <i>Ther, thiu/thie, thaz</i>	W-pronouns ? <i>Sowelkso, sowatso, sowieso</i>	Pronom. adverb. <i>thar upha</i>	Rel. adverb <i>thar</i>
1170–1300 Early Middle Dutch	D-pronouns <i>die, dat</i>	W-pronouns <i>(so)wie(so)</i> <i>[wiens; prep.+wie],</i> <i>(so)wat(so)</i>	Pronom. adverb <i>daer-</i>	Rel. adverb <i>daer</i>
1300–1500 Late Middle Dutch	D-pronouns <i>die, dat</i>	W-pronouns <i>wie, wat</i> <i>welc</i>	Pronom. adverb <i>daer-</i> <i>waer-</i>	Rel. adverb <i>daer</i> <i>waer</i>
1500–1700 Early Mod. Dutch	D-pronouns <i>die, dat</i> <i>hetgeen</i>	W-pronouns <i>wie, wat, welk</i> <i>dewelke/hetwelk</i>	Pronom. adverb <i>daar-</i> <i>waar-</i>	Rel. adverb <i>daar</i> <i>waar</i>
1700–1900 Modern Dutch	D-pronouns <i>die, dat</i> <i>hetgeen</i>	W-pronouns <i>wie, wat, welk</i> <i>dewelke/hetwelk</i>	Pronom. adverb <i>waar-</i> <i>daar-</i>	Rel. adverb <i>waar</i> <i>daar</i>
1900–2000 Modern Dutch	D-pronouns <i>die, dat</i> <i>(hetgeen)</i>	W-pronouns <i>wie, wat</i> <i>(welk, hetwelk)</i>	Pronom. adverb <i>waar-</i>	Rel. adverb <i>waar</i>

In the Old Dutch period (1000–1170), we find the relative D-pronouns *ther, thiu/thie, thaz*,⁸ the relative pronominal adverbs such as *thar upha* ‘whereon’ and the relative adverb *thar* itself,⁹ and possibly the generalizing or indefinite relative W-pronouns *sowelkso, sowatso, sowieso* ‘whichsoever, whatsoever, whosoever’. In the scarce Old Dutch material only instances of *sowelkso* occur. Evidence from Old English and Old High German, in which similar *sowatso-* and *sowieso-*forms are found, suggests that these other generalizing, indefinite (relative) pronouns existed in Old Dutch too.¹⁰ In the Early Middle Dutch period (1170–1300), we find the relative D-pronouns *die, dat* and the D-form *daer*, both as relative adverb and relative pronominal adverb.¹¹ As free relatives, both *die, dat* and the W-pronouns

⁸ The relative pronouns *ther, thiu/thie, thaz* often appear combined with the relative particle *ther* (e.g. *in sinemo euangelio, thaz ther uile wola geluttered is* ‘in his gospell that is very well purified’) (cf. van den Toorn 1997: 64–65).

⁹ In the West and North Germanic languages pronominal adverbials emerge between 500 and 1000. They are to be found in the so-called *Leiden Willeram*, which has many instances of preposition + pronoun (such as *mit then* ‘with which’) as well (cf. van den Toorn 1997: 65–66).

¹⁰ It is equally plausible that in Old Dutch single interrogatives were not used as relatives yet, as they did not occur in Old English and Old High German either (cf. Schoonenboom 2000: 31).

¹¹ Pronominal adverbials are not as frequent as in later centuries: instances of preposition + pronoun are also to be found.

(so) *wie* (so), (so) *wat* (so) occur (cf. van den Toorn 1997: 109; Schoonenboom 2000: 31–32). An important assumption made by various handbooks is that the relative pronoun *wie* only occurs in *casus obliqui* and after prepositions (van den Toorn 1997: 223). The question, however, is why the *wie* forms were introduced only in these specific cases and not at random in subject and object positions, in oblique and prepositional cases. One possible answer may be an explanation based upon Romaine (1984). Romaine draws our attention to Keenan and Comrie's case or accessibility hierarchy which includes the following syntactic positions: subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique > genitive > object of comparison. Keenan and Comrie proposed this hierarchy to predict certain constraints on relative clause formation in universal grammar. They made two predictions:

1. subject NPs are most frequently and objects of comparison are least frequently relativized;
2. if a given relative clause formation strategy works on two possible NP positions, then it must work on all intermediate positions between the two.

Romaine uses this hierarchy for another purpose, that is to clarify developments of relativisation strategies. She argues that new strategies of relativization will enter a language in 'reverse' order on the accessibility hierarchy. In other words, "the change 'sneaks in [through] the back door' via the least frequently relativized positions, and spreads out from there" (Romaine 1984: 463). It seems to me that this 'explanation' may well apply to the introduction of Middle Dutch W-forms as well. It seems plausible that not only a new strategy, but also the introduction of a new relativizing lexical element starts from the least frequent positions.

This explanation, attractive though it may seem, is, however, no more than a hypothesis, and further research on the basis of an extensive corpus of texts is required to provide further evidence. At this moment, all we can say is that it looks as if the oblique and genitive, the least frequently relativized positions, took the lead in the introduction of the *wie* pronouns. That frequency is not the only factor involved in the introduction of W-forms will become clear from the development from DAT towards WAT. The further dissemination of WAT took place in the period 1500–2000, when variation within the system had increased by the rise of yet other W-forms in the Late Middle Dutch period, the adjectival relative pronoun WELC and WAAR, both as relative and as pronominal relative adverbs (cf. van den Toorn 1997: 223; van der Horst 1988; van der Horst & Storm 1991).¹² In the process of the WAT dissemination, the properties of the antecedent appear to have played a decisive role.

Six types of antecedents can be distinguished on a scale from a maximum of indefiniteness to a maximum of definiteness:

Types of antecedents from a maximum of indefiniteness to a maximum of definiteness:

1. free relatives
2. the antecedent is a sentence/clause
3. the antecedent is a word such as *iets* 'something', *niets* 'nothing', *alles* 'everything', *veel* 'much', *weinig* 'little'
4. the antecedent is a nominalised adjective, often a superlative: *het gekste wat/dat ik ooit heb meegemaakt* 'the strangest [thing] that I ever saw'
5. the antecedent is an indefinite noun or noun phrase
6. the antecedent is a definite noun or noun phrase

¹² For the relative pronominal adverbs, instances of W-forms arose in the 15th century (van den Toorn 1997: 223; van der Horst & Storm 1991). The question of whether the relative adverb *waar* emerged earlier, at the same time or later is not addressed and remains unanswered.

Texts from the period 1500 to 2000 show that WAT appeared gradually into the six contexts corresponding to the six different antecedents (van der Horst 1988). Whereas in Middle Dutch DAT occurred in all six categories while WAT was much rarer occurring only as a free relative,¹³ in various seventeenth-century texts WAT is the only relative pronoun in category 1 (free relative), at the same time, WAT and DAT occur in categories 2 and 3 and only DAT is to be found in categories 4, 5 and 6. In twentieth-century spoken Dutch WAT has gained ground in all six categories. In the written language, however, WAT is used less frequently and proscribed by normative grammarians from categories 5 and 6. We may conclude that the change from DAT towards WAT has nearly completed itself: in a process that took no less than seven centuries, relative WAT has almost ousted relative DAT.

After having examined the DAT → WAT development, we may ask whether the two other processes of change followed a similar path or are still in the process of doing so. Let us take a look at the DIE → WIE development first. Although the WIE forms occurred in Early Middle Dutch in the oblique (the genitive) and with prepositions, its use as relative pronoun did not spread quickly to the available categories.¹⁴ In the case of DIE/WIE there are four possible antecedents (categories 1, 3; 5 and 6 above). In Modern Dutch, DIE is still the common gender and plural relative pronoun which occurs with an indefinite or definite antecedent (categories 3, 5 and 6) and functions as subject, indirect or direct object. It is the more remarkable as at the end of the sixteenth century, both DIE and WIE occurred as free relatives. It is in the first printed Dutch grammar, the *Twe-spraack vande Nederduitsche letterkunst* 'Dialogue of Dutch Grammar' (1584) that the two variants are explicitly mentioned by means of the example *die/wie zyn acker boud zal broods ghenoech hebben* 'he who cultivates his field, will have enough bread'.¹⁵ In Modern Dutch WIE is the current free relative form, but the pronoun has not made its way into the other categories yet, in any case not in accepted Standard Dutch.

In contrast with the slow spread of WIE, the DAAR → WAAR development was a relatively rapid change. The number of WAAR-cases increases from the fifteenth century onwards and around the beginning of the twentieth century the process of change came to an end: DAAR no longer occurs as a relative place adverb or as a relative prepositional adverb: *waar* and *waarin* etc. ousted and replaced *daar* and *daarin* etc. The eighteenth century appears to have been a decisive period in this development: in the course of this century the number of W-forms rises considerably and the number of D-forms drops (cf. van den Toorn 1997: 425-426). A further examination of a large corpus of texts is required in order to establish whether either the relative adverb or the relative pronominal adverb led the way, or if the change took place in both cases at the same time and at a similar rate. Indications that the replacement of DAAR by WAAR followed the path ranging from the most indefinite antecedents (the free relatives) to the most definite (the definite nouns or noun phrases) were found in various texts that I examined, but this indication also needs to be confirmed by further exploration of a larger corpus of texts.

For all that, it may be concluded at this stage that the three similar developments in the history of Dutch have a different chronology: the DAAR → WAAR change was completed by 1900; the DAT → WAT change is nearing its completion at the present moment; and the DIE → WIE change is still going on. In all three cases we have to do with a slow, gradual development, a process of syntactic diffusion which took centuries and which still raises the question of what may have caused the process.

¹³ Cf. van den Toorn (1997: 424). According to Schoonenboom (2000: 36–37), in her corpus of Bible translations single *wat* did not function as a free relative before the sixteenth century.

¹⁴ According to Ponelis (1993: 191) in the seventeenth century prepositional D-relatives owed their retention to their high degree of formality.

¹⁵ The *Twe-spraack* (1584: 84) takes a conservative stand in the matter: usage of WIE is explicitly condemned and DIE preferred.

4 The process explained

The change from D-forms to W-forms may be explained as an internal linguistic development: native speakers are believed to have applied a kind of analogy, crossing the borders of a particular context of usage by comparing one type of cases with another. This may explain the spread of W-forms over various categories of antecedents, starting out from a specific context such as the most indefinite one.

External linguistic explanations have been proposed too: the rise of W-forms has sometimes been attributed to foreign influence.¹⁶ Ponelis (1993: 190), for instance, states that the interrogative-based W-system in Dutch was introduced from Romance, though without offering any evidence. Even in specific cases such as that of *welk*, foreign influence may not have been so straightforward as assumed. Burridge (1993: 243) argues as follows:

“Relative clauses can also be formed using *welc* ‘which’. The difference here is that the coreferential noun phrase following *welc* is not deleted in the relative clause. In general, the construction is typical of **a more formal prose style**. It is extremely common in legal texts and probably represents **a stylistic borrowing from Latin** – it coincides with the introduction in the language of a number of other features explicitly based on classical models and is very characteristic of the 17th-century texts examined here” (emphasis added).

Ebert (1978: 25) made the same observation for German *welcher* that was used in a similar way in Chancery texts: “Dieser Gebrauch ist wohl dem des lat. *Qui* nachgebildet, das in Verwendung als Relativ und Interrogativ formengleich war und adjektivisch verwendet wird”. Although the occurrence in similar text types contributes to the idea of a stylistic borrowing from Latin charters, one has to bear in mind that a particular cause could lead to similar reactions in various languages: we have to realize that the rise of connectives in Middle Dutch, German and Latin has to do with embedding, subordination and the spread of compound sentences (cf. for instance Duinhoven 1988: 340, note 482).

Foreign influence has, rightly or wrongly, been assumed for the introduction of the W-forms. Once being introduced, the W-forms disseminated further, and it is in this process that normative grammar could have played a role. Linguists often argue that written language conventions are involved in relative pronoun usage, but they seldom give any examples of explicit grammatical rules. Having examined various grammars and linguistic treatises, I have to conclude that there is little evidence for prescriptive rules before 1800. Apart from the *Twe-spraak* quotation on *DIE/WIE* already referred to, I have not come across prescriptive remarks in any of the sixteenth-, seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Dutch grammars studied. What is more, these grammars hardly pay any attention to the relative pronoun. Things become different in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when grammarians highlight differences between formal and informal usage, between spoken and written language, stating explicitly where and when particular relative forms are to be used. We have to conclude that it is not until the nineteenth century that explicit prescriptive rules are given which could have either stimulated or delayed the ongoing D→W-developments. As the grammars usually did not welcome the extension of W-forms, this implies that written language of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, influenced by grammars, does not reflect the state of the D→W- change in the contemporary spoken language. For the twentieth century, however, we know this from our own experience: people use *wat* in spoken language, while they still write *dat*.

¹⁶ In my contribution I will not go into the question of why Dutch has a pronominal relativizing strategy and not a relative particle strategy as the Scandinavian languages and English have. Poussa (1999) has a particular view on this problem, but all I will note here is that, due to the scarcity of Old Dutch material, it is very difficult to verify any such hypothesis.

5 Major shift or lexical change: the data, the system, the future

The three D→W developments can be described fairly accurately during ten centuries, although there is a lot of variation depending on the specific texts examined. Further research is needed to fill in the details and to answer specific questions relating to the process of the change. What we know further is that during the period 1900–2000 the alternative relative pronouns *dewelke*, *hetwelk*, *hetgeen* became obsolete or were restricted to highly formal language. For the future, the similarity between the three developments described makes it highly plausible that ultimately the DIE → WIE change will spread further and extend to the categories of both indefinite and definite antecedents. Examples (16) and (17) already occur, although they are still considered as non-standard.¹⁷

- (16) dat is nou die jongen **wie** gisteren aan de deur kwam
‘that is the boy R stood at the door yesterday’
- (17) dat zijn nou ideeën **wie** ik heel interessant vind
‘those are ideas R I find very interesting’

To make the chronological table complete I could add the row for 2000–2100:

Table 2. Predicted development of Dutch relatives.

2000–2100 ?	D-pronouns - ?	W-pronouns <i>wie, wat</i>	Pronom.adverb <i>waar-</i>	Relative adverb <i>waar</i>
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It is highly probable that during the twenty-first century the D-pronouns *die* and *dat* will be eliminated and replaced by the W-pronouns *wie* and *wat*. Whether a further development towards a single W-form *wat* will take place such as happened in Afrikaans, the language which originated from seventeenth-century Dutch, remains to be seen. It may be noted that even in Afrikaans *wie* maintained its position for human referents in free relatives, possessive and prepositional relatives (Ponelis 1993: 188–191).

To return to the title of my paper: “major shift or lexical change”, what is the answer at the end of the day? Typologically speaking, Dutch has maintained its pronominal relativisation strategy and did not shift to a different type of relativisation strategy. Must we, therefore, conclude that only a lexical change has taken place in the course of the Dutch language history? Indeed, a lexical change it was, but a major one. Let us imagine the situation of native speakers of the early Middle Ages: in their language system, the Dutch D-forms functioned as both demonstratives and relatives; the W-forms were interrogatives. So far, so good. For native speakers of 2001 the system is a bit more complicated: D-forms still function as both demonstratives and relatives, but W-forms equally have two functions, both interrogative and relative. Will native speakers at the end of the twenty-first century have a more simple system at their disposal? It is highly probable that they will. Alternative relative forms are likely to have become obsolete altogether; D-forms will be restricted to a demonstrative function and W-forms will have the double function of both interrogatives and relatives. If that is the end of the relative developments, or whether further developments towards an invariant particle will have started by then cannot be predicted. For now, hopefully, my presentation and discussion of the Dutch data and changes may contribute to a better view on the differences and similarities of the Germanic languages, a goal that both organizers and participants of the conference *Dialect Contact and History on the North Sea Littoral* intend to achieve.

¹⁷ My own observations in this respect are similar to those mentioned in van der Horst & van der Horst (1999: 172–173): these examples which originally occurred only with human antecedents, are found with non-human antecedents too.

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